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ABSTRACT

Following the trend of organizing English literature study around "themes" both promotes superficial instruction and neglects a major facet of literature especially appealing to today's youth--that literature is a work of art covering the whole spectrum of man's experience where any of man's feelings, thoughts, and actions may find a place. With the primary appeal of art being emotional, literature study should assess and explore the "felt-thought world" given by the artist; and literary style, theme, character, and action should be interpreted only within the context of this "world." (JMC)

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TE 002 071

What is English?

S. H. GIBSON, *Editor*

The current trend appears to be to organize courses in English literature around themes. The increase in size and number of classes and the reduced time allowed for the teaching of English, along with the new methods of teaching and class organization may be making "theme-teaching" the logical resort, even an inevitable one. Theme—thought, message—is the simplest element to grasp in a literary work and for one thing is something which many students can "get up" on their own or be quite easily helped to comprehend, say in the large group lecture. Students, too, will find in thematic organization of a course a greater clarity with respect to the features of coherence and purpose than they may have found in the traditional make up of courses. But we shall be at fault in two important respects if we overemphasize theme and treat other aspects of literary work of art only incidentally.

In the first place, will not our teaching of English be superficial? In the second, I want to argue, we shall be misrepresenting English literature. In the poem, the play, the novel literature is art, not prettied-up prose, not philosophy, psychology, ethics with a sugar coating—unless indeed we hold with George Bernard Shaw and other Marxist critics that art should be didactic or is in fact propaganda. The fact of the matter is, that Marxist or not, we have long considered theme to be essential to the literary work of art. For that matter, all art has been thought of as making some sort of statement, as having a meaning which presumably can be verbalized. Our heritage is decidedly Rationalist and it is still very difficult for us to imagine any other mode for truth than the verbal or other symbolic statement. When Yeats tells us that truth cannot be known but only embodied, or we think of the well-known remark of Archibald MacLeish that a poem should not mean but be, we assume these poets are being rather esoteric or mystical and are likely to conclude benignly, that they must be allowed their poetic license.

But there are many signs that we are undergoing the first major philosophical (I shall call it) revolution in 300 years. It is not just that the relativity theory has pointed up the limitations of human reason or that the most influential philosopher in the world today, Ludwig Wittgenstein, has demonstrated the "limits of language" revealing the use of language to be but one of many modes of behaviour; it is, that in society

itself we are seeing acted out the implications of such thinking. The young in particular are rejecting knowledge, book knowledge, abstract thinking. They want just what might be useful and meaningful to them, now. They are opting for being rather than knowing or doing. To be more specific, they are finding truth in sensation, in feeling, in Being. Or we could say they find sensation, feeling more meaningful more important than thinking, learning a body of knowledge or learning skills, which they regard as, at best, means to ends. In sum they take the attitude that what we are is important, not what we know. In this connection it is worth recalling a remark of Father Culkin's of Fordham University. He said that, above all, the student today wants his teacher to *feel* something and to show it.

There are of course other causes and other facets of the current social-cultural revolution, but also there is no doubt that the young in their violent reaction to "the system" and our Rationalist come Puritan heritage are going to an extreme. The life of sensation and feeling which they celebrate will be short lived, and the pendulum hopefully will come to rest somewhere near the centre. T. S. Eliot and T. E. Hulme inveighed against the "dissociation of sensibility", the split in Western culture between thought and feeling. Where our culture has emphasized reason, science, the abstract and the remote, the young in revolt are overemphasizing sensation, feeling, the concrete and the here and now.

The Hall-Dennis Committee in re-introducing John Dewey and progressivism into Ontario in new and colourful clothing can be seen as cashing in on the revolt of youth, riding in its slip-stream as it were. In their anti-intellectual tendency they, by implication at least, and by default of not providing for the necessary checks and balances, put too much stress on feeling and emotion, assuming that useful work and study necessarily must grow out of interest (the emotional factor) whereas work and study often generate interest. And we must note as well that what we know determines how we learn. There must be a happy medium. Perhaps we should look closely at T. S. Eliot's advice: we must feel our thoughts and think our feelings. The Gestalt psychologists (e.g. Suzanne Langer) tell us no sharp line can be drawn between thinking and feeling. If in the order of things, in our daily living, being and therefore feeling properly takes precedence over knowing and doing or at least must be considered the end of all our living, we cannot neglect mind and knowing and doing. Nor, because of the importance of feeling and emotion, should we assume that these qualities make all people equal. It is impossible to legislate equality. People always have differed and always will differ not only in their interests but in abilities, accomplishments, and in what they contribute to society, and these differences should be recog-

nized not only in society at large but in our schools. As individuals and persons we are equal before God, but as citizens we differ.

Now to return to the question "What is English?" I have considered the above general philosophical remarks necessary to prepare the ground or to soften up my reader for what I believe is the answer to the question. I am convinced that the element of feeling in a literary work of art, that is in the novel, the play and the poem, should be stressed over that of theme. I am very much in agreement with Tolstoy's definition of art: "Art is a human activity consisting in this that one man consciously by means of certain external signs hands on to others feelings that he has lived through, that others are affected by these feelings and also experience them." To this I would add T. S. Eliot's notion of the objective correlative. Eliot wrote in his discussion of 'Hamlet and His Problems': "The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an objective correlative; in other words a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular *emotion*; such that when the external facts which must terminate in sensory experience are given the *emotion* is immediately evoked." Two examples of lyrics which perfectly illustrate Eliot's dictum are Christina Rossetti's "Birthday" and Emily Dickinson's "Snake". The quality of a particular feeling of love in the first and of a particular feeling of fear or fright (the "zero at the bone") in the second are not just embodied in the poems but generated or created for the reader.

Is not the primary appeal of a work of art emotional, a matter of some feeling or other? This is most clearly the case in music, the simplest and most popular of art forms. Feeling, emotion is what is expressed primarily in the dance, the ballet. Architecture and sculpture give shape to feeling almost exclusively. Sculpture, especially in official monuments, may make a statement, express an idea, but feeling is primary. But what does Henry Moore's *The Archer*, which stands in front of Toronto's City Hall, give expression to other than feeling? The new City Hall, a piece of sculpture itself, makes its appeal to feeling. While we are at it, we can look across the street to the old City Hall with its tower of public virtue pointing sacrilegiously heavenwards and discover in Victorian morality the kind of feelings therein embodied.

It is in painting and literature that we find more than feeling. Picasso's *Guernica* as well as giving form to feeling makes a statement about war as of course do Goya's paintings. And the literary work of art covers the whole spectrum of experience where any or all of man's feelings, thoughts, actions may find a place. Our experience of a literary work despite its varied elements is unique. The work makes a single total impact, and has a single over-all effect. In this experience the 'dissocia-

tion of sensibility' finds its remedy. Ezra Pound has said that "An Image is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time." The elements of thought, feeling, action combine to form a single whole or experience. In this experience the element of feeling is basic. It is what makes a work of art come alive. It is not sufficient that feeling be merely described or talked about; it must be generated in the manner Eliot has so clearly stated. It is this fact which makes the element of feeling in a work of art different from that in biography or diary.

Essentially, art makes no off-the-page reference. Its relation to the world of everyday experience is analogical not logical. There is no problem in regard to the relation of literature to life. Literature is life. It is a way of spending time; an experience. Where there is obviously a message as in Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* or Orwell's *1984*, the reader is confronted with a problem. Is he to find proof for the author's statement in the facts of the world that the author created for him or in the facts of the world as he himself knows it or could know it? If the two worlds should correspond in many important respects then the reader still has the risk to face of generalizing from the particular or of arguing from analogy. The proper question here is why does he want a message? Does not the true reality and primary interest of a literary work lie elsewhere than in theme or message? Mark Twain's river symbolism in *Huckleberry Finn* or his comments on society delivered by Huck are not what interest us most, are not what has made it one of the world's greatest literary works *of art*. The substance of the book is in the felt quality, the marvelously robust vitality of the escapades of the King and the Duke, the ludicrous posturing of the Child of Calamity and General Desolation aboard the logging raft, in the words and thoughts and feelings of Huck, in the vivid and terrible rendering of 'Pap'. The book teems with life; it is a felt world that we experience. Our chief interest should be in penetrating, sensing, feeling this world with our students. When we look at it and attempt to "teach" it we of course find ourselves looking at style. Style is essentially what gives shape to feeling. The ability and interest of our students will determine how far we go in examining the author's techniques of evoking a felt-thought world. Illustration of literary devices and techniques is of course not the end we should have in view. These are only means to ends and can be found in writing that is not art. Our purpose primarily is to enter and to explore the felt-thought world the artist gives us, to determine its landscape and the quality of the mode of being found therein. Theme, character, action will be parts of this world and will be understood and have their meaning within its context.

Our business is to assess the quality of the mode of being, of the felt life of the literary work more than to determine the truth or falsehood of the author's thesis, if indeed he has one. In addition to the redeeming vigour of life presented in *Huckleberry Finn* and the splendid and loveable character of Huck, the novel must be found a romantic piece, using the word in its derogatory sense. We go with Huck on a voyage of escape, on an effortless, free ride down a warm river, whose banks offer all the necessities of life plus good fun and adventure, all there for the taking, like goods on the open shelves of a super-market but with the difference that no time of reckoning awaits at the Cashier's counter. When evil or discomfort turn up one can always clamber aboard the raft and leave that sort of thing behind. But it was fun while it lasted. This comment overlooks, of course, the fact that it was also for Huck a spiritual journey of self-discovery, that his destination was wisdom.

The world of war that Hemingway gives us in *Farewell to Arms* is of very different quality than that of Remarque's in *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Hemingway's soldiers are foils for his code-hero, Henry. The feelings they express are only such as to show him in a good light. He in turn differs only slightly from the taciturn dead-pan hero of the typical Western, and when he walks off alone in the rain he is, for all the difference it makes, riding off into the sunset. We dare not follow him, for to find him pushing a shopping cart in Loblaw's, to use our super-market illustration again, would be too intolerable. Not so with Remarque's Paul. He is no romantic hero. In him we see a highly sensitive young man against a back-drop of sheer horror. His experiences are traumatic. He is broken by the war. The experiences of Hemingway's Henry have the character of wish-fulfilment serving only to confirm him in his invulnerability. In distinguishing between the quality of feeling in the heores in each novel there is an implicit judgement being made and so an assessment of what both authors are presumed to be saying, that is, their themes, if we like. But the point is that what is being assessed is not an idea or thesis but an *experience* and the essential component of experience is feeling, certainly in the case of these two novels. Romantic or not we may prefer *Farewell to Arms* and the escapist aspects of *Huckleberry Finn*, but what we can do is assess the quality of feeling, the mode of being that marks our preference, and if we wish, reasoning from analogy, relate it in some meaningful way to the worlds of our everyday experience.

Experience of art is meaningful and significant in a way that our everyday mundane experience is not. Milton declared that poetry should be "simple, sensuous and passionate". Perhaps we can discover the difference in the two kinds of experience in terms of his three character-

istics. In Milton's 'sensuous' we can see Eliot's objective correlative and since the felt element in the work of art must be generated and not merely described, it will follow that the number and variety of felt experiences or modes of being must be limited. Hence the world the artist-writer gives us must be a relatively simple one compared to the complexity and variety of thoughts, feelings, acts which crowd everyday of our lives. Even though he sought to present only twenty-four hours of Bloom's life, James Joyce could include in his novel but a small fraction of Bloom's experience in that day. We shall not trouble ourselves about significance because it is dissolved in a third term, 'passionate'. What interests us most is intensity of feeling and if not always intensity then at least clarity. What is the significance of *King Lear*? Is it in a theme or thesis? Shall we choose one of the several deadly sins committed by Lear—anger, pride?—and conclude that it is a bad thing? Shakespeare in saying everything says nothing. We are left only confronting the fact of life. The catharsis of pity and terror is not an idea; it is an experience. Perhaps Milton would have added a fourth term to his other three if he had been thinking of the larger literary forms. It would be, I should think, 'ordered'. A work of art is structured; its parts are meaningfully related. This serves the purpose of giving the world the author creates for us its appearance of completeness, its autonomy and therefore its unity; but the unity is essentially emotional not rational. F. O. Mathiessen speaking of *Samson Agonistes* says, ". . . what gives the poem its life is its quality of emotional expression through its expert fusion of content and form."[1]

In conclusion: Art is to experience, with its essential component of feeling, what langauge is to thought and law and custom are to conduct. It gives shape and defining form to, primarily, emotion. As well as creating for man new worlds of vicarious experience, it is the store-house of experience for it supplies a deficiency in man's memory. It is the felt, especially the sense quality of past valued experience which memory first lets go.

To neglect art and the education of the young is to deny them nourishment of the spirit. Is not English literature, since it is the most all embracing of art forms, the most humanizing subject in the curriculum? If so, then the reduction in time allowed for learning and teaching of English constitute a serious loss to our students.

[1]F. O. Mathiessen, *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot*, p. 127.